

Reverend Michael Windridge - Rural Dean, Depwade Deanery

Election Address



Preface

"Faith is a lifetime of letting go of what you think about God in order to encounter what he really is." (Meister Eckhart)

"At least five times, the faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases, it was the dog that died". (G.K. Chesterton)

Reason for Standing

My main motive in standing for General Synod is to bang the drum for rural ministry and to join with others in wishing to see restored Church Commissioners' funds to their primary purpose, namely stipendiary parish ministry.

The 'Queen Anne's bounty' in 2026 now stands at £11.6 billion. At present, according to figures provided by the campaign group 'Save the Parish', only 8% of the Church Commissioners' planned annual distribution is ring-fenced for parish ministry. So while the Commissioners control billions there are 35 Dioceses (including Norwich) which are running deficits, with 23 holding less than three months' reserves.

Personal Background

Before being ordained in Norwich Cathedral 1993/94 (following two years' residential training at Salisbury & Wells Theological College) I enjoyed a varied career. I was born and brought up in Wolverhampton (a keen Wolves' supporter!) and began working life in the family business, manufacturing and retailing children's nursery furniture throughout the Black Country.

Educated at Repton and Oxford (Keble College, first year only, 2:1 Jurisprudence mods) I joined The Economist Magazine as a trainee correspondent on the business and agricultural affairs desk. Following a variety of roles in public affairs consultancies, I worked in the House of Commons as a research and parliamentary aide and subsequently for a Government Minister.

With the exception of one year's House for Duty at St Mary's Parish Church, Twickenham, I have served in rural ministry throughout and, with both Bishop Grahams' PTO I have presided and preached in many village churches in South Norfolk.

After three years as priest-in-charge of the rural parish of St Mary Magdalene, Bolney, West Sussex, I was licensed as Associate Priest for St Margaret's, Hempnall in 2024 and also made Rural Dean for Depwade Deanery.

I have been married to Sabrina since September, 1988. Our 30 year old son, Harry, has just invited me to conduct his marriage to Verity next year.

Banging the Drum for Rural Ministry

The Church of England has over 10,000 rural churches with 40% of churchgoers worshipping in rural churches. Approximately 68% of churches in Norfolk are based in rural areas.

I have witnessed at first hand the extraordinary strengths and pressures of rural ministry both in Sussex and Norfolk.

I believe the rural church is an essential part of the Church's mission to the nation: Rural churches are not merely custodians of buildings or declining congregations, they are a mission opportunity to be embraced.

Crisis in Stipendiary Clergy Numbers

General Synod must address the crisis in stipendiary clergy numbers in the Church of England. According to the Church's own Ministry Statistics the number of full-time stipendiary parish clergy has dramatically declined to an all-time low of just 6,295 across the entire nation. Not only is there an institutional failure of retention but active priests choosing to retire from ministry outnumber planned retirements.

47% of all stipendiary priest are over 55; only 37% of all active clergy are in stipendiary roles; there are more clergy of 75 and over than under 50; and there was a 23% decrease in new ordinands between 2020 and 2023.

Clergy wellbeing

The Church of England's 'Living Ministry Research 2025' reveals that 35% of clergy show signs of possible mild or clinical depression and 40% feel isolated. The decade-long study highlights tiredness, isolation, demoralization and financial anxiety as primary wellbeing challenges.

Shortage of churchwardens

The growing number of unfilled churchwarden posts in the Church of England is a matter of great concern. They are vital volunteers, especially in rural areas. The loss of a churchwarden creates a significant administrative gap - often filled by hard pressed clergy. The Church of England should recognise their Christian leadership in their local communities and consider the feasibility of developing an effective national recruitment strategy. (Letter to The Times on 25th May 2026).

Prayers for same sex couples

I am wholly in favour of prayers of blessings for same sex couples. I'm glad that General Synod has given its backing to work on same-sex relationships and marriage as the 'Living in Love and Faith' process has now come to a conclusion.

Climate Change – a moral and Christian issue

I feel proud that our own Bishop Graham is the lead Bishop for the Environment. As he has insisted, climate change is not simply a scientific or political question but a matter of Christian responsibility and compassion. General Synod has just published a major new teaching document from the House of Bishops, 'Hope for All Creation'. The document sets out a Christian understanding of the environmental crises facing the world. If elected to General Synod, I would want to play my part, together with others, in ensuring that the Church sufficiently understands the practical realities of rural communities and farming as well as the critical loss of biodiversity.

Impact of Artificial Intelligence on human relationships and society

During a House of Lords debate in June 2026 Archbishop Sarah Mullally's central argument was that AI must be "pro-human". A rural priest's ministry, especially, is based on things AI cannot replicate: knowing people, listening, praying, grieving, visiting the lonely, etc. General Synod has a key role in the debate about the ethical constraints of this new technology. At the same time the Church must recognise AI's enormous potential in areas such as medicine, science, education and work.

Safeguarding

I agree very much with Professor Alexis Jay, the academic who chaired the Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, that the Church should transfer all responsibility for dealing with abuse and safeguarding to an entirely independent body.

Seeking your vote

With extensive experience of assisting over many years in South Norfolk rural parishes together with previous business, local government (former cabinet member, South Norfolk Council) and my parliamentary experience I believe I have the skills to make a meaningful contribution to General Synod proceedings.

The Revd Michael Windridge

michael.windridge@talk21.com : Mobile : 07787 511470 : Fritton Cottage, Norfolk NR15 2QS

"Give us patience and courage never to lose hope" (From the Collect for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity)